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COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

In 1979, the international community adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Since then, a committee has met annually to monitor the implementation of the Convention. Salma Khan from Bangladesh is chairperson of the 16th session of the Committee. She discusses how much progress has been made by women in the 154 countries who have ratified the Convention.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

To ensure all women in all societies and cultures equal civil, political, economic and cultural rights, the international community, in 1979, adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. It also established a committee to monitor the implementation of the Convention, which has been ratified by 154 countries. The Committee recently held its 16th session.

With us today to discuss the status of the Convention and the progress women have made in the enjoyment of these rights is Salma Khan, the Chairperson of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. Joining me to talk with Ms. Khan are Tuyet Nguyen of United Press International and Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde*.

Ms. Khan, welcome to World Chronicle.

KHAN: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Khan, here in the United Nations we hear a lot of talk about gender equality and the elimination of discrimination, which of course is the purpose of your Committee. But the Organization sets a very poor example. The Secretary-General, the new Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, appointed his cabinet of top officials, and of 18 only two were women, and the two were in the lowest echelon of the top ranks, assistant secretaries-general rather than under-secretaries-general. In the General Assembly, of 185 Member States, only four have women permanent representatives. What's your response to this lamentable example set by the United Nations?

KHAN: I think this is very, very significant in the sense that all the member nations — obviously, you know, they look upon what the United Nations is going to do, and especially since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action —

LITTLEJOHNS: This was the Beijing Conference on Women [Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China, 1995] —

KHAN: Yes, the Beijing Conference. It was very categorically said that at any level to have an impact created by women and also to set forces which can really have women's voices heard, you must have at least 33 per cent women to begin with, where you can really aim for achieving the goal of equality within a given frame of time. So considering that point of view, I think this is very, very significant, and this is really not in any way trying to set an example to the member nations of the United Nations.

LITTLEJOHNS: Why did the Beijing Conference settle for only 33 per cent? After all, there are more women in the world than there are men.

KHAN: Well, in that 33 per cent, the concept was that you have to have at least a minimum number to make an impact on those decisions where we are talking about that women must play an equal role in making decisions which really govern the system of the world, and which obviously have an impact on women's lives as well as, of course, all other citizens of the global nation. So, to begin with, even to have any kind of impact, this is the minimum you need. So it is not that only 33 per cent should be women's share, it is that this is the critical mass which is essential to have any kind of impact, to have women's voices heard, or any disadvantaged group, to give them a sort of a platform so that their needs are not being recognized as special needs which are part of the universal human right.

LITTLEJOHNS: I think one should make the point that your country, Bangladesh, has a woman prime minister and, I believe, a woman leader of the opposition.

KHAN: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: So Bangladesh is pretty good.

BASSIR POUR: Michael mentioned the United Nations, but can you tell us if there are any countries in the world at all where women truly do enjoy equality on every level — social, political?

KHAN: Oh, no, no, no. Unfortunately.

BASSIR POUR: Not a single country?

KHAN: No, no, not a single country. And, as a matter of fact, sometimes we have a sort of a misconception that it is very much related to the level of development. Of course the Scandinavian countries, the Nordic countries, are doing very well, comparatively, I would say. But when you really examine very deeply, when you scrutinize — you know, it's when we talk of women's rights or universal human rights, it is not only in politics or in economics or in sort of public sector employment, it is in all areas as well as in your own family life and in your personal domain. So some countries have done relatively well, I would say, like Nordic countries. But when you think of equality, it's not only that no countries have achieved it, I would say most of the countries are far from it, they are really far from it. But what some of the countries, mostly western countries, what they have done is that *de facto* equality is far more sort of equality in measure than it used to be maybe 10, 15 years ago, but — I'm sorry, *de jure* equality, but *de facto* equality is far, far from it.

BASSIR POUR: You mentioned — if I may just follow up — Tuyet, you mentioned the Scandinavians who are doing better than others. Give us some examples of where women are not equal in the most advanced countries.

KHAN: Well, wage discrimination is a very important area where, like during our last session we have examined, considered the report of Denmark, and we found that the wage disparity is totally unacceptable. I mean, women in most cases earn 25 per cent less than the

wage men are getting. Then domestic violence is also another area which goes across the board, everywhere, in all countries. Of course, it's just a matter of degree, but it is very much in existence in most countries. Then also there are certain other areas, like women are participating in Norway in the public sector, nearly 75 per cent employees are women, but when you think of the management level, this is even more disheartening, that women are being used in many different ways, but their capability is sort of not being fully utilized in that sense. But they are contributing a lot. But when you take the statistics at what percentage women are at the level of top management, then the percentage is comparable to even —

LITTLEJOHNS: The numbers look good but the quality is not the same.

KHAN: Yes, yes.

NGUYEN: But you have a Convention that is called the "bill of rights of women". And it's ratified by 154 countries. Why do they ratify a Convention that they don't carry out? I mean, how do you verify the implementation of the Convention?

KHAN: Well, I would say — as a matter of fact it has now been ratified by 155 countries; one country has been added very recently. But, well, that's not the most significant thing. The thing is, I must admit that there has been a much greater awareness about, you know, the universality of women's rights, especially after the Beijing Conference and Platform for Action. So countries do ratify not only because of this, but there is also a kind of belonging to the international platform of human rights regime, which is talked about in most of the countries. So it is not something which is not at all on the agenda, it is very much on the agenda of many countries in the world, including developing countries, even in some of the least developed countries. So countries are ratifying, not out of any pressure, I would say, as such, but at the same time in most of these countries the women's movement has assumed a much stronger sort of force than it used to be 10, 15 years ago. So the most important thing is the women's movement, which has gathered a momentum in most of these countries. So Governments are feeling obligated, they are being pressured. And in some other ways, because of the international fora, there is also a kind of, a sort of pressure on the Government to ratify this Convention. And in Beijing there was also a sort of a — most of the Governments made a commitment, you know, which we call the Beijing Declaration, and one of the sort of objectives of that Declaration was having universal ratification of this Convention.

So we are sort of approaching ahead. So countries who ratify this Convention, they are — somehow we notice more concern with the *de jure* equality, you know, having their laws and sort of regulations in place, not so much when it comes through the implementation.

NGUYEN: Do they transform the Convention to national legislation?

KHAN: Some countries have, not all countries. I would say the majority of the countries have not done so. But, at the same time, if you examine the constitution of the

countries, of the UN member nations, I would say a very large majority of the countries have guaranteed equal rights of men and women in their constitution, but even the constitutional obligation is not met. So, of course, the Convention strengthens this kind of obligation within the country.

NGUYEN: So every year you have, you know, country reports from those who ratify the Convention, and then you meet a couple of times to discuss those reports. A lot of times you were critical of those reports —

KHAN: Yes.

NGUYEN: — and the countries that really failed to comply with the Convention. I don't know; it can go on year after year after year. The Convention is written by the Governments, monitored by the Governments. So I don't know who really would try to make it work in the UN system.

BASSIR POUR: Are there any sticks? Are there any sanctions against countries who do violence systematically?

KHAN: Well, as a matter of fact, there are not any sanctions; there is a kind of — it's a concern which has been expressed that countries are making reservations on some of the articles. I would say there are two ways of sort of taking this issue into consideration. One is that countries formally enter a reservation, which the Convention has room for. So, like most of the international —

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean, although they ratify, they can say, "We don't agree with this"?

KHAN: Yes. There is a rule for making a reservation —

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, that very much weakens ratification.

KHAN: — which is common with all human rights treaties, because, after all, the countries have a sovereign right to not agree with certain provisions of any convention, any treaty. So this is part of the international norm in a convention. But at the same time, if a country enters a reservation on the very basic principle of a convention which is the core, which guarantees the general principle of equality, then it really becomes a matter of concern. So it is not only having reservations on certain provisions, but on what provision you are entering a reservation. That is very important. So when we examine the other conventions — there are many other human rights [conventions], you know, especially the six major human rights treaties — countries which have entered a reservation, those are relating to a much less substantive area, whereas in the women's Convention all the reservations are entered on very, very substantive and critical areas.

BASSIR POUR: Such as what?

KHAN: Such as, say, for example, article 2 of our Convention, which guarantees sort of non-discrimination by itself, that the Government which ratifies the Convention has to enter into an obligation, a contractual obligation with the United Nations that the Government would take all necessary measures to ensure the equality of women.

LITTLEJOHNS: That means equal pay for the same work, for example?

KHAN: Well, it is a broad guarantee. Then we come to specific issues like equal pay and equal access to health, equal education. But article 2 is sort of a general guarantee. So when you enter a reservation on article 2, you are violating the — you are nullifying the whole concept, the sense of the Convention.

BASSIR POUR: Exactly.

KHAN: So that is one problem, on what you enter a reservation.

LITTLEJOHNS: There's not much point in ratifying the Convention.

KHAN: Yes, as a matter of fact, there is not much point of ratification. But nevertheless, to encourage the States parties to give women at least some handle, some leeway to claim their right, to demand their equality from their Government, the Committee has decided to go ahead with this, but then trying to persuade the Governments so that these kinds of reservations are withdrawn within a very limited time. Some countries, sometimes they want some time to sort of consider these things within their own Government.

LITTLEJOHNS: Like 20 or 50 years?

KHAN: Yes. And also another very notable sort of feature, when we talk of women's rights, many countries have not even entered any reservations, but they bring up issues like cultural characteristics, ethnic sort of — ethnicity of the people, tribal —

LITTLEJOHNS: Religions also, perhaps?

KHAN: And of course, very importantly, religious principles. But what we feel in the Committee is that none of these should undermine the universal human rights of women. They should not be used as a reason, and the Committee does not accept the position that, you know, your tribal, ethnic, religious, cultural or traditional practices could be the reason for a violation of a woman's human rights. So these are some of the major concerns. Ratification is of course most important, but even after ratification we find that it is really a great, great challenge to the Committee and to women of all the United Nations countries.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Salma Khan, Chairperson of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

NGUYEN: Ms. Khan, I wonder if you really rely on a third party whenever you have a dispute with a Government to really know the truth of what's going on. A Government can make a report to you and they may lie also. How do you find out?

KHAN: Oh, we are giving a lot of emphasis, especially these days, to independent sources of information, and especially from NGO sources. As you know, NGOs in most of the countries have become a very vital force for development. Also, they are not just a monitor from apart, from outside, they have become a partner in development, in progress, especially in awareness-raising for women, being sort of the spokesperson on behalf of women's groups who are most disadvantaged in most communities. So NGOs are becoming a very strong force in the whole process, within the States parties, the Committee, as well as the NGOs. And this is, for the first time, some other NGOs who have nine members from different NGOs of the countries who are presenting reports. So this is one way of having them in a sort of a role to play when we examine the report of the State party, so that they know what goes on, they understand the mechanism, so they can take back home how the whole thing operates, and they can educate their women and can strengthen a sort of a force from within the country, within themselves. But also we induce the — quite often they send a parallel report to us. We also do accept those as independent sources of information. But nevertheless, our main sort of dialogue is with the State party, and so these we would consider as supplemental sources of information. These are not ignored, but these are not the major sources of information to which a State is being subjected to give an explanation of.

BASSIR POUR: I'd like to take a reverse role. As Michael mentioned, in your own country women are, in fact, in power. Now, in countries where women are in power, does it have an impact on the style of the political life of the country, on other spheres of life, when women are in power?

KHAN: Oh, yes, of course. I think this — I mean, you would find commonly in every country, wherever such things have happened, wherever women are in power, we find there is a very strange — it's a kind of a note of difference between the developed and developing countries — because I come from a developing country, I'm from Bangladesh. So I have noted that in developing countries, when women have some economic empowerment, they really — I mean, they assume sort of their role in a much more positive way, in a much more assertive way, maybe because they had been deprived so long. But in developed countries, women, when they have economic empowerment, the progress is comparatively slow to the extent of political participation or making sort of a very strong contribution to the women's movement. Like in my country, we have some microcredit programmes which have given tremendous empowerment to women —

LITTLEJOHNS: In fact, as an example for all the developing world.

KHAN: For all the developing world. And I have noted that in my country rural women are more aware of the Convention than urban women. They are more vocal about their rights. They have — they mobilize much more sort of in a solidified way. They have

really solidified what they want from the Government, not that they're getting it, but they are much more aware that this is what they're not getting. Not what they have to get, but they definitely know what they're not getting. And as regards political participation, we had our election just about six months back, and during that election also we have noted that women, during the last election, played a very critical role as voter. I mean, they were not voting any more like they used to vote, when their husbands have said who to vote for. They very categorically demanded: "What can you do for women? What can you do for us? Then we are going to vote for you." So that definitely economic empowerment creates a tremendous political awareness.

BASSIR POUR: Do you have statistics of numbers of women in parliaments around the world?

KHAN: Yes, yes.

BASSIR POUR: Have they risen? Are there more women?

KHAN: Unfortunately, the trend is quite stagnant. As a matter of fact, in some of the Scandinavian countries as well the trend is a bit going down.

LITTLEJOHNS: The opposite way.

KHAN: Opposite way.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Khan, you've spoken several times about the women's movement, and of course the women's movement has been gathering strength over the years, but it seems to me, perhaps I'm mistaken, that a lot of women are not very happy with the so-called women's movement. And they seem to be a little nervous about what could happen if women are empowered as you and others feel they should be. One can go back, of course, to the 1950s when Mamie Eisenhower, the wife of President Eisenhower, said "Ike runs the country and I turn the lamb chops." But of course we've come a long way since then. But at the same time, when the equal rights amendment was being introduced here in the United States, some of the most strident opponents were women. So how do you deal with women who don't go along with your ideas?

KHAN: First of all, I wouldn't agree with you. I would beg to differ with you. Because I'm sure there are women like that. But then, when we talk of statistics, how many are there like that, what is their percentage, who are they, from which category, from which class are these women? I mean, do they really represent women of the world? Do they represent like what I told you about the critical mass of women? Firstly, that. Secondly, well, there are women also because when the opportunities are so limited — you know, once I asked a similar question to a woman. She told me that, you know, if I know that only one woman is being taken.... Let's go back to the example of the United Nations. Now, somehow if women got the whispering news that only two women would be taken, I'm not going to give

that information to other women, because I would lose my opportunity, because it is more symbolic. Do you think that in the United Nations system there are not good enough women who could have been given this position? In every society, even in America, when Ms. Albright becomes the Secretary of State, it's such a big deal, such big news, that even I know from the start from her school education how brilliant she was. Because that had to be so. She has to be brilliant, otherwise she would never be considered. But I don't know anything about Warren Christopher, whether he was — what kind of educational background he had, because I was conditioned to accept that he must be very smart. So for men it's okay, it doesn't matter —

LITTLEJOHNS: But she has to be that much smarter, is what you're saying.

KHAN: So, women have to be many, many, many more times smarter. So women also have — one factor is they have been conditioned, they have been raised — this is what we call a sort of stereotyping of women, a stereotyping of social behaviour. And secondly, when women know that out of the whole package you are really offering only a small bit to women, and then among women there is also a lot of competition.... So I really don't think that —

BASSIR POUR: When you say offering, are you suggesting that men purposely say to themselves, no, I'd rather work with another man? How does it work?

KHAN: Offering is in this sense I would say, like who are — even in countries like — now, let me give an example. In Denmark the representatives said few women are at the top position at the managerial level because, you know, women don't come forward, and the employers don't choose women, so we can't do anything. People who are employing, they don't choose women. Now, the question is, who are these choosers? Who is choosing? So that's why I'm saying who is offering. Now, it is the Secretary-General who is a man, and maybe another 20 other positions below him, they're all men. So they're offering, they have decided, they have made up their mind that only this portion can be offered, or they have perhaps thought not many more than so many women are qualified now to have this kind of a position. So even in a country like Denmark, when the representative can say, what can we do, because people don't choose women, that means that you have to put a woman in the position of a chooser. If you allow me to select who do I appoint, then only you can say.

BASSIR POUR: Do women choose women?

KHAN: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do women what?

BASSIR POUR: Choose women?

LITTLEJOHNS: What happens in Bangladesh? Does your woman prime minister give preference to women for jobs?

KHAN: No, not much.

[LAUGHTER]

NGUYEN: Ms. Khan, I want to ask you another angle of this. What about the case of women who really accept custom and traditions that really discriminate against women? I take the case of in Africa, certain African countries where a young girl is given to a priest as a slave. It has made headlines lately. How does the Committee deal with this case? People, women, the mother accept this kind of discrimination.

KHAN: Well, the mother is then — again, it's — recently I was in Cairo, and I sort of also have had experience of similar things, like genital mutilation of girls, something similar, which is an extremely oppressive practice. Now, mothers, when I asked them, they said, yes, we would do that. Now, there are a number of factors: they are a product of a culture, they are a product of a society, they are a product of a convention and a norm where they have never played the role of a decision-maker, they have never been given to understand what is the difference. And the woman answered me that, if I don't allow my girl to go through this, she will not be married. So again, it is a male culture, male society, which is determining. And what happens in most of the countries where culture and practices and norms play a very important role? You would see that these norms and practices, they differ tremendously. If it is good for you it should also be good for me, and if it is not good for me, it cannot be good for you. So only on the basis of gender you determine that I must be the one who should uphold the culture, who should be responsible to maintain my ethnicity, who should be, you know, sort of the main depositor of whatever is supposed to be so characteristic of my people.

NGUYEN: So can we say that the men usually impose the rules that make life miserable to women?

KHAN: Yes.

BASSIR POUR: All in all, are you disheartened by the progress that you're making?

KHAN: No, no, we are not. Because, of course, we really also have to understand that society and culture and these things are not so easy to do away with. But if we sort of — the main thing is the commitment of the Government. You know, if there is a political commitment, we have noted that many of these things can be done. Because, first of all, these stereotyping ideas which you have been giving them in their books when they go to kindergarten, so this woman, when you say that woman, the mother, is subjecting her own daughter to a system which is harmful to her health, because she has been —

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Khan, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.**

Our guest has been Salma Khan, Chairperson of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. She was interviewed by Tuyet Nguyen of United Press International and Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde.*

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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